

## GUNSLINGER

Vern practiced his deadeye stare in the rearview mirror. Again. He'd lost count of how many times he'd flashed himself that hard-assed glance. Every time it was satisfactorily threatening.

It had been a long drive from Texas to Manhattan, but he was in the final stretch, barreling down the FDR in his pickup truck and trailer, searching for the Houston Street exit along the narrow inside lane, corralling all the other vehicles into the far left lane, as intimidated by his reckless driving and battered truck exterior as they would have been by his fearsome gaze.

"Shithole town," Vern commented, churning with disgust at all the graffiti covering every square inch of every underpass and accessible concrete surface, while his ass bounced in the seat from the countless potholes, cracks and gouges in the pavement.

He felt like he was back on the rodeo circuit. Somewhat entertaining, but he would have greatly preferred a bull ride to the potholes.

Vern adjusted the championship belt buckle girding his slim waist and providing a much-needed contrast between his denim jeans and denim shirt. A denim cowboy hat bounced on the passenger seat beside him. As much as Vern enjoyed his denim, his work clothes came in a wide variety of styles and color schemes, or flavors, as he called them.

His given name was Patrick Kelly, but he called himself Vernon Crane (Vern, for short) because it better matched his western wardrobe. Vern adopted the moniker in Waco. Even called it a moniker, but only when talking to himself, his preferred method of discourse.

He looked and dressed like a cowboy most of the time. To some extent that was true. Strong, silent type. Face baked a leathery brown. Steely blue eyes squinting in the sunlight, like you-know-who. Even so, he never thought of himself as a cowpoke. If he had a business card, his job description would match the one word title of this chapter.

It had been years since Poppa last summoned him "to court." Like the last time, the parts of the city visible to him still looked like a trash bag emptied on a garbage scow.

Vern was ready for a change of scenery, but not this scenery.

He'd been working as a ranch hand (for fun) and part-time muscle for a local meth lab (also for fun), when Poppa sent him a telegram with a typically terse message, printed all in caps:

GET YOUR ASS UP TO NYC PRONTO. GOT A JOB. PAYS IN GOLD. BRING EQUIPMENT.

Gold. He liked the sound of that. Poppa knew he would. The promise of wet work and his preferred compensation method got his ass into gear quickly, though he would have travelled anywhere when Poppa came calling, tempting offer or not.

Vern hung up his saddle, packed a shitload of “equipment” in his pickup truck and headed up north to the recently vacated apartment Poppa had arranged for him to occupy in the East Village of Manhattan, or more specifically, Alphabet City.

Vern didn’t know it, but the apartment belonged to his twin brother. He never knew he had a twin brother, because Poppa had gone to great lengths to keep them apart, for a very specific reason he would soon discover under extremely distressing circumstances.

Vern’s twin was equally unaware of his brother’s existence. Even I was kept in the dark, for the same reason, until the morning hours of April 6, 1996. Holy Saturday.

Vern didn’t know it was Saturday, Holy or otherwise. Didn’t know what happened over the previous two days, or the starring role Poppa had cast him in for his ongoing Passion Play.

He only knew that he was hungry and wanted to park his pickup on whatever shithole street in this shithole town Poppa had led him to.

“I hope he’s there to meet me,” Vern said sadly to himself, unable to admit or even comprehend his utter loneliness. “Fat chance,” he added, more realistically.

Poor Vern.

He could really use a friend.

As long as it wasn’t me.

## SQUEAK

Randy Gunn had a gun. Had plenty of them actually and he wished he had one now. He would put it on the bar between himself and Fred just to let his customer know how annoyed he was getting. Instead, he squeaked the glass he was cleaning.

*Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

Fucking asshole Fred. Fred was any male customer. All the female customers were Sally. He called them all Fred or Sally to their faces to make sure they understood the contempt he felt for them. They whined about it often, especially the regulars who all wanted to think they were friends. Like this Fred.

This Fred was going on and on and on like they all did, but he was going on and on one on too many. *Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.* Randy cocked his head and gave him THE EYE major big time. It was a terrible EYE, an EYE from Moses on the Mountain, an Ahab-to-Moby EYE that you'd have to be a total fucking idiot not to heed. But it went over this roly-poly motherfucking Fred's head like so much mist. *Squeak.* Fred kept prattling on, oblivious and somehow immune to the fire and brimstone now erupting from THE EYE.

*SQUEAK. SQUEAK. SQUEAK.*

Randy had variations on the *squeak* for every situation. Waiting in line, it was the *tap tap tap* of his Doc Martens. In a car, of course, the horn. He had no use for people who shied away from horn honking, because he knew for a fact that it worked.

He used keys, coins, knuckles—whatever it took—to beat out the Morse code of his impatience. Always building...building. As his broadcasts grew in urgency he felt certain that the offender would soon amend whatever behavior was interfering with Randy's agenda. Invariably though, the Freds and Sallys of this world would just not LISTEN!

*SQUEAK! SQUEAK! SQUEAK!*

“So what do you think I should do?” Fred finally asked with a hiccup at the end of a long, sad sigh. Randy almost groaned with relief that Fred had given him an opening.

“What do I think?” asked Randy, slowly pulling himself up to his full 6’ 4” height and then going even further, arching a bit backwards for added effect. At the same time, he put both his hands on his waist and spread his feet apart, glaring down as if he were a pirate captain and

the other eye had a patch on it. He could almost hear the parrot squawking on his shoulder as he bellowed:

“I’ll tell you what I think, Fred. First of all, I think you should take a fucking bath. The boozestink coming off you is so bad I’m ready to piss on the bar just to freshen things up. Secondly, I think you should shut your fucking yap just long enough for me to turn on a tape recorder so you could listen to the non-stop bitchfest I have to put up with from the minute you plop your fat ass down on that stool at four o’clock in the afternoon till closing time. I think you should go home and stick your dick in something...anything! Anything that would keep you from coming in here for just one fucking night!”

“But most of all, I think you better get it through that fat fucking melon on your neck that when I start squeaking this fucking glass it means it’s time for you to put a tip on the table and wobble out the door or sit still and SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

“That’s what I think, Fred.”

## STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Call me Fred. Might as well since my “real name” still didn’t make complete sense to me until two days after all this shit started. All this shit (and I do mean shit) refers to every slice of mayhem, murder and madness that happened from the time I woke up in Downtown Dumpsville until...well, you’ll see. I’ll try to lay it out as clearly as I can, which is not going to be easy, given all the...well, you’ll see that too.

Ahem, let’s try this again. My conscious day began with the following thoughts:

*Who am I? Where am I? How the fuck did I get here?*

Those were the top three questions rattling around in my aching head, like my skull was a hollowed-out gourd filled with ricocheting pin balls. Of course, the first question was the cold sweat fear monster leading the puzzling pack. I could have easily chalked up questions two and three to a Quervo overdose, which I definitely knew was not the case, even though my head hurt so much it would have been easy to confuse my migraine with an axe-in-the-forehead hangover. Apparently, I knew the difference, even though I didn’t have a clue about Question #1.

*Who the fuck am I?*

If you’ve ever wondered what amnesia actually feels like, give this a shot: Try to picture the face of somebody you never gave much of a shit about and haven’t seen in twenty years. Your second cousin Lucy. What did you see? Either a flesh-colored face blob, or a blank sheet of paper. Now imagine the same result, but substitute Question #1 for the visualization cue.

Scary? Hairy scary. Worse, my reasoning abilities were severely hampered by the aforementioned migraine. I woke up with it. Or maybe I should say, the migraine woke me up.

I was having a series of very vivid dreams. Or memories. Or visions. I’m still not sure.

The last part I remember began in a white bedroom with white furniture, including the desk where I was sitting, writing in a journal. I have no idea what I was writing, or where the bedroom was, or why it felt so cozy and familiar, but suddenly, I stood up, like a puppet yanked by its strings.

I walked out the bedroom door. On the other side, there was a massive spiral staircase leading down, down—at least five stories. The stairs and floor were white marble. The railing was black iron. I gripped the rail and trotted down the steps. On the next landing there were walls

on either side. Unlike the top floor, the wood was dark, teak maybe, with ornate moldings around the closed doors.

When I reached the next landing, the door to my right was open. Inviting. I accepted the summons and walked inside. It was a library. A huge, Morgan-sized-Library with wrap-around balconies and ladders on rollers to reach the highest shelves. One wall was free of bookcases and covered with portraits in fancy gilded frames. All men. The portraits seemed arranged by age: in the higher ones, the men were wearing powdered wigs, frock coats and puffy shirts. The largest portrait, hanging closest to the ground, featured a man with long, blondish-white hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. He was dressed in a charcoal grey suit with a black shirt and blacker tie. His mustache was neatly trimmed. His eyes, piercing blue.

I knew that face, but I didn't know how or where I knew it. I walked closer, staring into those cold blue eyes. Suddenly, I saw a tiny crescent-shaped pattern of blindingly bright zig-zag lines overlapping the smiling face of the ponytail guy. The closer I walked, the bigger the crescent grew, blocking my vision of everything behind the vibrating shape.

There's a name for this, I've learned: Scintillating scotoma. It's caused by a spasm of nerves or blood vessels at the back of the head that supply the eyes. After the scotoma stops scintillating, a migraine usually follows about fifteen or twenty minutes later.

"The book. Go to the book," a voice commanded me. It seemed like it was coming from the portrait but I heard it inside my head.

"Book? Which fucking book?" I yelled, gesturing wildly at all the books surrounding me.

*The only feckin' book that matters!*

The voice practically screamed inside my head. With an Irish accent.

My body twisted around, like it was bent by someone's will. It was the same puppet-master effect I'd experienced upstairs in the bedroom. When I turned, I was facing a lectern. Somehow, I hadn't noticed it when I was walking toward the paintings.

A huge leather-bound book sat on the lectern. It wasn't just old. It was ancient. A codex. The book was open to the center, but the yellowed parchment pages were blank. I felt like it was calling to me, another invitation like the open door, but much, much stronger. My hands reached out eagerly, maybe desperately, as the vibrating crescent filled my entire vision.

Then I woke up. Or at least, I think I woke up. My eyes were open, but it felt like I was still dreaming. I was lying in a small bed with a twin-sized mattress, pressed against a dirty white

wall. The plaster ceiling was cracked and a rusty water stain loomed above the sink-bathtub combo in the adjacent “kitchen.” A 1950s gray Formica table with pink boomerang patterns and two matching chairs sat a few feet away from the tub. Beyond the kitchen, there was a sparsely furnished living-roomish area with an overstuffed Art Deco sofa and a matching chair.

*Studio apartment, I thought. East Village? Alphabet City? Lower East Side?*

I didn’t know. That’s when questions two and three slammed me. I didn’t know where I was, or how I got there and yet, there was a vague familiarity that felt almost as dreamlike as the all-white bedroom where I had happily sat, scribbling in a journal. About what? About *who*?

*Boom!* Back came Question #1. I had a feeling of *I*-ness (I knew I was thinking and my thoughts didn’t feel foreign), but there was no *I*-dentity, no *who* in the *I*. No *me*-mory.

Strangely, I did remember a lot of other stuff. I knew about things, lots of things, even amnesia. Of course, what I knew about amnesia I’d learned from movies, which meant that I didn’t know diddly about real amnesia. For me, it felt like I was awake inside a dream.

Before I woke up, I was in a big mansion, but I didn’t know how I got there or what I was supposed to be doing. I felt exactly the same lying in that little bed, looking up at the cracks in the ceiling. I was in some shitty apartment, with no idea where the apartment was, or what I should do next. When I tried to remember anything about what I’d been doing the night before, or the day before that, or any fucking day in any fucking week or year, all I could conjure up were more vague images that felt exactly like...yeah, like I was dreaming.

Or experiencing the ultimate blackout hangover.

But like I said, I knew the difference. My head was screaming, but my mouth wasn’t dry and pasty. The migraine was so severe that even the meager amount of sunlight streaming through the living room windows hurt enough for me to push myself up from the mattress, stagger across the room and close the blinds. Medicine was next on my to-do list. I looked in the cabinet above the sink and found a bottle of Imitrex, which immediately taught me two things: either I, or whoever lived in this rathole, had been to a migraine specialist before and; either my, or his name matched the prescription label: William Cleary. The first name felt familiar when I read it. The last name seemed off, but I only spent two seconds worrying about it. I gulped down a small white pill with a cupped handful of tap water and crashed back down on the saggy mattress.

Half an hour later, the Imitrex kicked in enough to make rummaging through the house more of an urgent necessity than an agonizing chore, so I began exploring. The place was a

dump, but a tidy dump. The gloomy darkness was brightened by a string of twinkling Christmas lights (huh?) wrapped around a giant bookcase across from the sofa. Cutesy chachkies were neatly arranged on all the shelves, dressers, tables, end tables, windowsills, basically any surface that could provide a home for all the geegaws.

“He’s a collector,” I said, still not sure if the *he* was *me*, the mysterious Mr. William Cleary, or both.

The more I checked out the collection, the clearer the answer became. The feeling of familiarity I had when I looked at the ceiling, walls and the furniture was amplified a thousand times as I toyed with the toys, peeked inside cookie jars (all empty), and twisted the dials of antique radios. When I made my way to the festively festooned bookcase, the deal was sealed. Some of the books were fiction (mostly horror), but the vast majority were true crime stories with a morbid fixation on serial killers. Up on the higher shelves, like the books had to be sequestered from the curious reach of innocent children, things got really weird.

Occult spell books. Grimoires. Some of them were modern reprints. Others were really old...the true stars of the collection. *The Book of Raziel the Angel*, *The Sworn Book of Honorius*, *The Key of Solomon*. One volume drew me like a magnet—maybe because the bleached, white binding leapt out like Moby Dick breaching from a sea of brown and black leather.

The words *Hermes Trismegistus* were crudely scrawled on the spine in black ink block letters. I pulled the book from the shelf and frowned at the hand-written words. “What kind of asshole would do this?” I fumed with disgust and resentment. *Like I did when I bought it?*

“Your favorite kind of asshole,” whispered a *very* familiar voice...in my mind. It was the same Irish-accented guy I heard in the mansion library, commanding me to, “Go to the book!”

The voice was so clear and so *present*...that it scared me like a ghost jumping out from behind the couch.

I plopped down in the big fat chair to steady my nerves, still clutching the book.

“Your favorite chair,” the raspy voice said, a sing-song sneer of a sound, laced with contempt, or amusement, or amused contempt. Baiting me. Taunting me.

*Like he always does*, I thought, barely recognizing the sound of my own internal dialog amidst the outside intrusion, still clueless as to who *he* was, or what *always* might mean.

I shook my head like a dog trying to wick his fur after a lake plunge. It only made my headache worse. On the plus side, I didn’t hear any additional snotty-ghost commentary on what



a dumb move I'd made. I looked around the room, my ears perked for any sound, interior or exterior. After a few silent moments, I took a deep breath, settled deeper into the chair, opened the book and read the title page: *Corpus Hermeticum*.

I knew what the words meant even though I didn't know how I knew what I knew.

I was holding the greatest hits collection of alchemy's founding father, the same mythical master whose name was scrawled on the spine. Translation: Hermes Thrice Greatest.

I leafed through the pages, filled with tiny hand-written words spelled with Greek letters. And guess what? I could read them.

"Am I some kind of ancient scholar?" I wondered, hustling out of the chair and over to the bookcase. My eyes scanned across the book spines. Many of the titles were written in Latin, some in French, even a few in Aramaic. I could read all of them.

"What the fuck?" I cried, staring at the blinding-white binding of the *Corpus* again.

"That book is cursed you know," said a whiskey-laced voice.

This time, it didn't come from inside my skull. It was memory. A memory so clear that it was almost like watching a movie unspooling in front of my face. A big bear of a man with long, whitish-blond, stringy hair and a matching mustache was standing by the bookcase in the same place where I currently stood, holding the *Corpus* with one hand while he pinched his nose with the other, like the book was spewing out more noxious fumes than the stench of unwashed flesh wafting up from beneath his long, black overcoat.

I dropped the book to the floor, then hastily picked it up again, delivering it back to the vacant slot in the bookcase, surrounded on either side by brown, almost waxy, leather bindings.

"Ever hear of anthropodermic bibliopegy?" another voice asked me with a leering purr, from another crystal-clear memory. The speaker was a very old man in a very old bookstore. I was clutching the neatly packaged *Corpus H* under my arm and heading for the door, having paid the ridiculously odd (but numerically significant) price of \$11,100 for the privilege.

"Yeah," I said, turning to face the gaunt geezer. "Books bound in human skin."

"Ever seen one? Held one?" he asked with a yellow-toothed grin.

"No," I replied, but knew I'd be holding one soon. Just like I knew that the books bracketing the *Corpus* on my shelf had been purchased from the same proprietor, and bound with the same crinkly brand of "leather" that I'd first handled under the old man's auspices.

I remembered something else too. He had hundreds of them, stashed away in a secret bookcase. Worse still, most of them were the diaries of murderers bound in the skin of their victims. And for some incredibly, sick, twisted reason, I had bought two of them. I plucked one from the shelf and cautiously opened it like a bomb squad soldier, terrified at what might happen, but driven to fulfill my duty. Before I could focus on a single word, a slip of paper fell out and landed at my feet. It was sales receipt, with a personal note from the Crypt-Keeper.

*Happy reading Mr. Cleary.*

“Hoo boy,” I sighed, finally getting a much firmer grip on Question #1.

My name was indeed William Cleary, and evidently, I was one sick fuck.

The “sick fuck” part didn’t bother me as much as it probably should have, considering what I was holding. What actually bothered me a hundred times more was a feeling, a certainty that even though I seemed to be William Cleary, that wasn’t the headline news.

I was something more than that. Something *other*. And I wasn’t alone. There was someone...*something*...living inside me, sharing the same skin, the same husk.

The voice I kept hearing, the Irish, liquor-soaked growl that kept pinging my brain from the moment I opened my eyes was the same voice that came from the overcoat-clad, scraggly-haired, stinky manbeast who warned about the cursed *Corpus*. It was also the same voice that belonged to the cleans-up-good version I’d seen in the library portrait. But no matter how long and hard I racked my brain, I couldn’t put a name to the face.

“Oh, fer cryin’ out loud Billy! It’s Paul, ye feckin’ idjit!” he yelled so loudly in my mind that I collapsed back on the couch, clutching my throbbing temples.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” I said when the jack-hammer pounding eased enough for me to string four words together, then add two more. “It’s Paul.”

## THINGS TO DO TODAY

1. Remember more stuff.
2. Read the journals.
3. Who the fuck is Paul?
4. Find the lock for the key.
5. Groceries.
6. Fifth of Stoli.
7. Look inside the suitcase.
8. Try the mirror again.
9. Rein in Vern.
10. Fred and Sally's.

Yes, I actually made a list. I could have gone on longer but I stopped at ten because apparently I always stop at ten thinking that's about as much as you can expect to get done on a good day, and so far, this wasn't even close to a good day.

As for the memory retrieval process, they oozed out slowly, like sewer sludge. My journals helped when I found them, but the entire last year was missing, which I guessed, had the stuff I really needed to know, like where I'd been and what I'd been doing, plus #3 on the To Do list and some other items I left off the list but needed to add later, like where that mansion was located, and what the deal was with the big book on the library lectern.

I didn't bother putting those things on the Today List, because even if I did remember where the mansion was, my head still hurt so much that the best I could manage regarding outside adventures was a walk to the grocery store to fill my empty fridge and a trip to the liquor store to fill my empty freezer.

I quickly discovered that the apartment was in Alphabet City on East 3<sup>rd</sup> street, between Avenue A & B, which was a lot better than living between B & C, and ten times better than C & D. I didn't have to go outside to figure that out. There was a shitload of bills and junk mail stuffed in the lobby mailbox. I've got an old Apple Powerbook, so finding the date was easy too. Holy Saturday, 1996, which also meant that the big blackout started on Good Friday.

Not a good omen.

According to the journals, I'd been living there for six years. Six not very exciting years. I was a tarot card reader and numerologist by trade, and I'd written endlessly about "the numerological significance of the Major Arcana" and other assorted mumbo jumbo. There was also a ton of bitching and moaning about the neighborhood gentrification and even more gripes about how dangerous it still was to walk around at night, especially between C & D where half of the buildings were still condemned, abandoned, or filled with squatters.

Topic number one was loneliness. Maytag Repairman-grade loneliness. I went out every night to the same dive, sat on the same barstool (almost always mysteriously vacant), nurse vodka and grapefruit juice (wishing they had a name for that) and watch. Watch Randy serve drinks and sneer. Watch Sally flirt with Randy. Watch them head out together after last call, if better options hadn't presented themselves. I watched. I listened. I recorded.

It seemed that I'd been nursing an unrequited crush for Sally, a frequent patron at Fred and Sally's. It wasn't the real name of the bar, but it might as well have been, at least for all the regulars who fell in line with Randy's patron demarcation system. I'm not sure about the apostrophe or its placement, since the name could work with a female plural (Fred and Sallys) or a plural possessive (Fred and Sallys'). No one, including me, called it Freds and Sallys, so I stuck with my original spelling.

By the way, the "Fred" that Randy was scolding in the dream/vision/memory I had before my mansion dream/vision/memory wasn't me. I was a silent observer two barstools away.

Looking. Listening. Feeling, but not much.

That sensation, that voyeuristic habit, was the first scrap of identity I recovered.

*I may not know who I am, but this is what I am.*

The journals went on and on and on, detailing day after day of tedious tarot readings to mostly pathetic customers desperately hoping for love, fame and fortune...and night after night of even more pathetic sojourns to my neighborhood watering hole, rarely talking to anyone, even more rarely getting laid, mostly mooning about Sally, feeling jealous of Randy and wishing something, *anything* would happen to break the endless monotony.

So yeah, boring stuff. Oddly, I didn't feel lonely after I woke up. Or sad, or desperate, or pathetic. And even though I could picture Sally's face with crystal clarity, I didn't get what the big deal was. The truth? Outside of the migraine (finally fading) I was pumped up and rarin' to

go. I couldn't remember feeling so rough-and-tumble before, like getting into a fistfight might be a nice way to wrap up my next night on the town.

I didn't find anything about Paul in the journals, leading me to conclude that he was a more recent acquaintance. I also couldn't find anything about the antique bronze key I'm wearing around my neck at the end of a long, thin, necklace. I also, also couldn't find any lock the key fits after scouring my tiny apartment, so I added #4 to the To Do list.

I did find out more (way more than I was prepared for) about the collection. Books bound in human skin was not the pinnacle of my morbid preoccupation. It was base camp for a trek that led me on a cross-country quest to acquire what I dubbed my SKC. Serial Killer Collectibles. The things *they* collected.

I was quite successful in my malignant mission. I packed all the "treasures" inside an old suitcase, which was stashed under my bed. I dragged it out and stared at the beige trunk with fear and fascination. Mostly fear. I didn't want to open it at first, knowing that the contents were likely to wreak havoc with my borderline nauseous, post-migraine tummy.

When I finally mustered enough gumption for a peek, I discovered it was locked. My necklace key was too big and I couldn't remember where I put the one that fit.

The Swiss cheese holes in my memory were driving me nuts, mainly because the journal version of me was constantly bragging about his photographic memory and...his visions.

Journal William said he could see things that other people were doing, no matter how far away they were. Even crawl inside their heads and feel their feelings. At first, I thought the same thing you're probably thinking. Bullshit. Guy's a crazy, delusional egomaniac.

The first one happened when I was standing at the mirror.

"What the fuck?" I gasped. Not because I saw one of the visions Journal William was gabbing about. I gasped at the sight of me. My hair was white. Pure white. Undriven snow white. Straight, thick, longish, but not shoulder length. White as a fucking albino. Not that I actually am an albino. My eyes are blue, my skin, smooth and unblemished. Yes, a bit on the pale side, but flushed with enough color to suggest it would tan rather than burn with a decent amount of light exposure. Sunbathing hadn't been featured on any day of William Cleary's To Do listings.

In addition to the shock of hair shock, there was a bigger jolt: I didn't recognize my face. It looked slightly familiar...but not that handsome, not that rugged. Not that ruggedly handsome. A soft phlegmy chuckle echoed in my mind. That new nagging, bragging part of me was

chortling in the background again, like he was proud of how well I'd turned out, like he had something to do with my freshly-minted face. Like maybe he'd earned us a blue ribbon.

The mirror in front of me was a full-length model, screwed to the back of my closet door. Freaked out over the face transplant, I stripped bare to check out the rest of my bod.

“Okaaaaaay, this is new,” I muttered.

I wasn't exactly buff with sculpted muscles, but I definitely seemed brawnier than my admittedly vague recollections. Adding to the impossible list, I seemed taller too. Stranger still, I *knew* I had tattoos before! Huge tattoos. Maybe metal implants in my *chest*.

Nope. My chest, back, arms and legs were as clear and unmarked as my porcelain-smooth face. “This is just...fucking...wrong!” I roared, enraged that I'd been robbed of all my hard-earned ink and metal, instantly indignant over the loss of a “me” I hadn't even considered ten seconds earlier, pounding my fists against the doorframe while my (bigger than before?) dick slapped from thigh to thigh.

“Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!” I thundered, stomping away from the mirror and back to the bookshelf. “See? See? It's all here!” I shouted to no one, thumbing through the final pages of the very last volume of my journals, where I wrote about the body-mod website I'd found and how excited I was to start my journey into inkdom with a full-back tattoo of my own design. Even the preliminary sketches were there: the alchemical symbols, the talismans, the incantations, the Ogham cipher “belt.”

All gone. All that pain endured now a worthless investment in a plundered bank account.

“What did you do to me?” I yelled, raising my bare arms to the cracked ceiling.

“Back to the mirror boy,” the voice in my mind calmly replied. “You have the gift. It will take us where we need to go. Back to the beginning. Onward to the end. Look...and learn.”

Look and learn. I'd heard that command before. I obeyed the new one and returned to the mirror. In less than ten seconds, the reflection of my beautiful new body was replaced with the vision of a small, filthy chapel with a blood-stained altar. Rising above the altar loomed a giant wooden angel. A *crucified* angel, nailed to a wooden cross with a thousand rusty spikes. In front of the altar, a lectern stood. The same lectern I'd seen in the mansion library, bearing the same precious tome, opened to the same blank vellum pages.

“Go to the book son,” the voice...yes, Paul's voice...whispered in my mind. “The Book will lead us home.”

I walked to The Book in a trance. Through the mirror? It seemed so. I was inside the chapel, and I knew where it was, on the top floor of an abandoned building between C & D.

“Paul’s building,” I whispered, stepping closer to the lectern.

“Aye, all gone now,” Paul whispered back. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Yes, he was right. I watched it burn. Watched Martin inside, left for dead with Michael Bean. Saw Martin rise, don the murdered fireman’s coat and air mask. Carry Bean’s burnt body to a waiting ambulance before fleeing past the police. Saw him racing uptown to the penthouse of the Plaza Hotel. Racing to rescue...Rose.

I set my hands upon the blank pages of the book and saw them.

Martin and Rose. Living in a farmhouse surrounded by a wheat field. A field filled with landmines. Digging in like the battle-hardened veteran Martin always was and Rose would become. Preparing to take on all comers.

“But no one is coming,” Paul whispered. “Not yet. Not until you’ve fulfilled your duty.”

“What duty?” I asked, staring at my naked body in the mirror again.

There was no reply. I waited a few seconds and repeated my question.

“You’ve got a long two days in front of you son,” Paul finally whispered. “Certain players are in motion and you’re stuck in the middle of the stew. Take another look and you’ll catch a glimpse of the straw stirring the drink.”

I stared into the mirror, expecting to see my reflection replaced with some horrifying vision of Armageddon. What I saw instead was simply a man, one I recognized from a more upscale uptown gin joint.

Buddy Binker.

From the frown on his knotted forehead, it seemed like we had something in common. A migraine. His was worse than mine, though still not as bad as the headache he’d be causing me, himself, Randy, Sally, Buzz, Maura, Della, Vern, Paul and The Striker.

Starting in approximately thirty-six minutes.